

Cathedrals of the Body

An Honors Thesis (AFA 489)

by

Mollie Baumann

Thesis Advisor

Hannah Barnes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hannah Barnes', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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I. Project Abstract

In my project titled “Cathedrals of the Body,” I am concerned with themes of identity and the body, as recognized and defined by my experiences with the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. The project is composed of five paintings, four of which are 36” x 48” and one that is 48” x 60,” as well as a series of smaller scale drawings that address similar themes. This work will include many linear and drawn elements and patterns with the use of acrylic paints and mixed media on stretched canvas.

“Cathedrals of the Body” will explore themes of communal and individual identity, as it relates to the body (community) of the Catholic Church. Within these guidelines, I will consider the relationship between the physical structures of the Church and its human members. I will also map out the connections between these members, in relation to the personal, spiritual, and hierarchical formations that are created within the community of both past and present believers. I will use information from historical religious paintings, in regard to the gestures of bodies, references to saints, and the communal aspects of the sacraments that can be found within them. My work will also include abstracted imagery of the body, as well as patterns found within the architecture and traditional design of the Catholic Church. Not only do I intend for my work to be an exploration of self and group identity in correspondence with history’s richest source of art, but I also desire to invite the viewer into a moment of silence and contemplation when viewing my artwork.

The strength of the Catholic community is founded upon generations and generations of people who are united by a common thread, encouraging one another to persevere, to pray, to seek peace, and to grow together in the midst of opposition and a multitude of differences; my work hopes to capture the beauty of this community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Hannah Barnes for her mentorship throughout the semester. She truly challenged and inspired me to think deeply about my topic, experiment with different mediums, and take the risks in the painting process that made this project a success. I would also like to thank Scott Anderson, David Hannon, Heidi Jensen, and Jacinda Russell for their honest and sincere critiques of the work and my ideas along the way.

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II. Significance

My body of work, titled “Cathedrals of the Body,” is similarly relevant to my personal life, as it is to the current state of the larger world. I was raised as part of a practicing Roman Catholic family that attended Mass together each Sunday. When I came to college, I started searching for truth and faith within a Christian community, specifically outside of the Catholic sphere. Yet, I kept finding myself returning to the Church, which remained a solid structure and foundation for my personal formation of beliefs, morals, support systems, interests, and identity. While “Cathedrals of the Body” does explore my personal faith journey, it also breaks down and addresses the connections between humanity and the Church: ideologically, physically, and spiritually. At a time when the world is focused on the accumulation of material goods, immediate pleasure, and the constant interruption of noise, I make my paintings to deliver a moment of pause, a heavenward glance, and a deeper true look at the community of believers within the Church.

For all of the reasons just stated above, I am taking a risk, a very great risk within the art community, by speaking about the Catholic Church and my faith in my art. In the art world, I have found that it is acceptable to display erotic, violently disturbing, and graphic images to make an impact, but it is not equally acceptable to write a line on one’s resume about the charity work she has done for the world through a religious organization; the simple statement of a specific personal belief might offend someone. With this project, I am taking a risk to bring my entire self into my art, which must include my faith. I would argue that all art is an exploration of connections between the artist, the material world, and the spiritual world. Art calls attention to beauty or brutality, rhythmic or harsh interactions with the resources of the earth, and the ideas from and about a piece of humanity. The best works of art are filled with an artist’s honest and sincere use of materials, which brings the viewer out of his present sphere and into one that presents action through stillness, new ways of thinking, and a moment of awe. I take the risk in drawing my viewer to such a place that exists within me and within the Church.

For me, painting has always been a time of prayer and meditation, offering a silence that is often overlooked within the rush of the world. I tend to work with repeated, detailed, and subdued imagery that allows both the viewer and me to experience a moment of stillness and quiet. I am also driven by the need to grow in knowledge and understanding of my self and the world, more specifically, how I do or do not fit into the world. The canvas becomes a palette on

which I am able to formulate my thoughts and reflect on different ways that people, physical and cultural structures, and implemented control influence the decisions I make and the person I choose to be. My art is not simply about who I am and what I believe when I stand in front of a blank canvas; it is about who I become and what is revealed to me through the process of painting. My art is not about seeing the world as it is in all its misery and turmoil; it is about calling the viewer out of that angst and revealing to him the beauty to be found in silence and hope.

III. Influences

Several artists who emphasize the use of line and repetition within a layered space heavily influence this project “Cathedrals of the Body.” I draw specific imagery and ideas from the following artists: Agnes Martin, Mark Rothko, Lari Pittman, Abbey Leigh, Timothy McDowell, and Julie Mehretu.

I have always been struck by much of the minimalists’ work, in the simplicity and methodical application of paint that lends itself to states of meditation. Agnes Martin has a particular ability to draw the viewer into her use of repeated patterns, shapes, and lines. The viewer is aware of each mark made on the canvas. I apply many of these characteristics to my own paintings, as I invite the viewer into a place of meditation with similar repeated mark making and the subtleties of color shifts found in Martin’s work.

For related reasons, I am drawn to Mark Rothko’s color field paintings. Again, the viewer is invited into a moment of pause. Color, rather than repetition, is used to overwhelm the viewer’s world and mind. The way in which Rothko applies the paint and colors in his work to create an atmospheric quality provides a simultaneous sense of stillness and movement, which I hope to capture in my own work.

Thirdly, I owe much of my experimentation with layering to Lari Pittman. I am constantly in awe when engaging with his work: the multiple endless layers, his strong use of line to divide and unify the composition, and the rich imagery that creates a push-pull tension for the viewer. Although I begin my work with subtle color shifts and a more atmospheric space, I then edit my work with designs and areas of bold, opaque colors, like Lari Pittman’s. I am inspired by the unification that Pittman is able to achieve in his work, which is overloaded with powerful imagery.

As I became more interested in the idea of mapping out both physical and spiritual spaces and connections, I stumbled across Abbey Leigh. In her paintings, she develops a flat sense of space by connecting continent-like shapes by detailed, drawn, and patterned line work. I was immediately taken by the decorative element of these lines and began to incorporate them within the map-like layers of my own work.

Timothy McDowell has influenced the way that I think of space in a painting. By creating texture and subtle color shifts, McDowell develops an atmospheric quality in his work. He also successfully utilizes several different ways of applying paint: line drawings, rendered objects, and design elements are combined within this space to create a balanced composition. I work to similarly combine varied visual characteristics to stretch a single image’s meaning and significance within a work.

Finally, Julie Mehretu has most influenced the architectural and drawn elements within my work. Her work is similarly built through layers that are both drawn and painted. Underneath her top layers, Mehretu has very methodically developed a layer of architectural lines that are traced on top of one another to create a multi-dimensional space. I am interested in the building structures and floor plan designs of cathedrals; therefore, Mehretu's work influences the way I use these images in my own work.

IV. Process

When beginning this project, I researched the rich history of art within the Catholic Church, including figures used in religious paintings, the meaning behind various symbols and icons, cathedral floor plans, contemporary art viewpoints on Catholicism, and Church decorations and adornments. I also searched for connections between the physical structure of the Church and the physical structure of our bodies. Throughout this initial process, I was gathering a file of visual language that I could then use to develop the commonly threaded theme of a religious community into each of the five paintings that were to follow.

As I sifted through and analyzed the imagery, I gradually worked on a painting that began to subtly combine and juxtapose these different images to create new meanings. Specifically, I found histopathology diagrams of the heart and lungs, a beautiful web-like design of internal organs that define a human being. I began to juxtapose these forms next to floor plans of cathedrals—the foundations of the physical structure of a church. I found ways to incorporate the gestures of different saints and holy people that I had previously observed in various artworks. As each element was added, the painting repeatedly revealed new connections, and I discovered new aspects about these various visual objects or design elements that quickly expanded my understanding of the topic, as well as the hierarchical and physical structures of the Church.

After I found several sources of imagery, I began to work on all of my paintings simultaneously, developing them through the slow, intuitive build up of several transparent layers. I am able to work in conversation with my paintings, and my paintings work in conversation with each other. Often, as I focus on one painting, a specific color, pattern, or representation will trigger a thought about the next step I need to take in the painting beside it. In this way, a dialogue develops between my works that can be seen when they are viewed as a whole.

I work with mixed media and several drawn elements in my paintings. These materials include rice paper, mulberry paper, tracing paper, ink, Micron pens, and graphite. I draw many linear figures on paper using pen and ink; the paper is then adhered to the painting's surface and becomes transparent when it is applied with acrylic medium. The paper creates a very physical layer on the canvas, while forming windows of depth and disorientation for the viewer. I will also draw directly onto the canvas to utilize line as a veil or sturdy structure within the painting. When I feel as though I am losing my grasp on a painting, I unite it with a solid glaze over the whole painting, which puts the

composition into perspective for me and I can begin anew with pushing elements back and bringing others forward. These various materials allow for exploration and experimentation within my work, as I develop various line and color qualities throughout.

To finish the painting, I will push and pull different elements in order to find the focal point. I also begin to add opaque elements and design details on top of the many transparent layers, editing and eliminating elements of the original composition to make it speak more clearly. By doing so, I create a sense of solidity and foreground within the atmospheric space established by the transparent layers.

Most importantly, I have allowed the process of painting to guide me more in this project than ever in the past. I have given the painting reign over itself, letting the imagery guide my steps as I use the information and research that I initially gathered.

V. Description of Work

In Your light, I take refuge best embodies both the formal and conceptual elements that I hoped to express with this body of work. Its content truly captures the heart and foundation of the community of the Catholic Church, while the imagery is bold, layered, and repetitively used.

The focal point of this painting displays the sacrament of the Eucharist floating mysteriously inside a tabernacle with rays of light emanating from all sides. The layer just beneath it shows a figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, similarly surrounded by rays and a string of repeated beads, as prayed in the Rosary. The tabernacle with Jesus is centrally located over her womb.

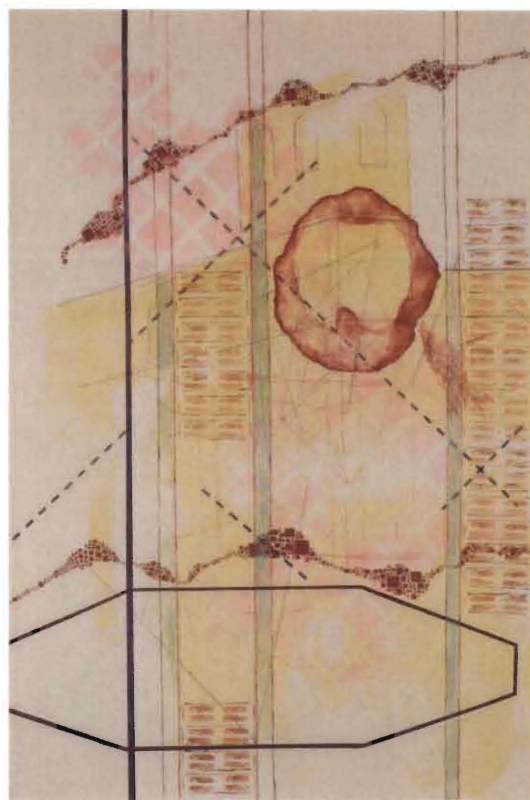


In Your light, I take refuge.
Mixed Media. 36" x 48".

Digging a bit deeper, one finds the external structure of a church, yellow rays coming out from the inside of the church and drawings of floor plans are scattered within. The fourth and final layer is filled with a design pattern that heavily references Agnes Martin. The time spent painting this repeated element was filled with prayer and silence, and it invites the viewer into a similar contemplative space. The content of this work truly captures the important elements of prayer, the shared meal in the Eucharist, and the honor given to God in doing both of these that becomes the foundation on which the community of the Catholic Church is built.

The process of this painting successfully displays the editing process that each of my paintings underwent. I first developed a base layer that included graphite drawings of architectural floor plans within an atmospheric space, which then became the basic structure on which everything else was added. I held onto some of this transparent layer, while painting out other parts with opaque color. By doing so, windows of depth are created among the flatter areas of pattern and repeated shapes. Each element of the painting is working together to accomplish a well-balanced, dynamic, and visually intriguing composition in which the viewer can enter and navigate the space and concepts presented.

My work titled, *Jesus said, "This is my body."* is most successful at portraying the sense of silence and contemplation that I hoped to capture in this project. The viewer is able to access the openness, which the painting presents more easily than any other from this series. The size of the canvas presents a space large enough to fill the viewer's gaze, while smaller details and patterns within that space draw him in and allow him to navigate the content. Layers are still very apparent, and there is a strong reference to Julie Mehretu's work as the geometric architectural shapes again become the foundation on which I build all else. The opacity of color is working in a different way in this painting versus the others; the bare canvas becomes a layer of its own with subtle transparent shapes beneath the opaque lines and structures. The formal elements of directional geometric lines and the subtlety of color and depth create an encompassing atmosphere for the viewer to navigate.



Jesus said, "This is my body."
Mixed Media. 48" x 60".

The imagery is largely abstracted and displays the communion offered in the Eucharist, the form of bread and wine that becomes the flesh and blood of Christ. The large red orb references the Eucharistic Miracle of Lanciano, where the bread turned directly into flesh while a priest was consecrating it. The flesh was shaped in this manner and has remained in the same condition for hundreds of years. In the painting, it is located above the altar. The green columns on either side of the shape are filled with patterns that represent the ribs of the esophagus, a reference to the Catholic participation in the consumption of the Eucharist. The imagery is loaded with symbolism that one might or might not catch while standing before the painting, but either way, the viewer is invited to enter the space with a contemplative spirit because of the low-contrast colors and subtlety within the layered patterns.

VI. Artist Statement

Cathedrals of the Body

In my project *Cathedrals of the Body* I explore my personal faith journey, as well as address the present state of the larger world. At a time when the world is obsessed with the accumulation of material goods, immediate pleasure, and the constant interruption of noise, I make my paintings to deliver a moment of pause, a heavenward glance, and a deeper true look at the structure and community of believers within the Church. Painting is a time of prayer and meditation for me. This can be seen in the repeated, detailed, and subdued imagery I use that allows both the viewer and me to experience a moment of stillness and quiet. I am also driven by the need to grow in knowledge and understanding of my self and the world, more specifically, how I do or do not fit into the world. In this project, I am directly concerned with ideas of structure within a community of individuals, as well as different aspects of the Catholic Church that have held its specific community together.

I gathered my visual vocabulary from the Catholic Church, as well as Agnes Martin's minimalist paintings. To make connections between the structure of the Church and the structure of the human body, I placed cathedral floor plans and architecture next to histopathology depictions of internal human organs. The paintings also include references to Eucharistic miracles, saints, the Rosary, and external structures of the Church. I have allowed the paintings to lead me to their finished states more than I ever have before. Each painting endured long addition and subtraction processes, as I added patterns, imagery, and materials and then edited these transparent layers with the introduction of opaque paint. I worked with a variety of materials, including acrylics, pen, mulberry paper, and graphite. I find that the pen emphasizes the significance of the drawn elements in my work, while the paper creates a true physicality in the various layers on the canvas. Within these layers, I created windows of depth and disorientation into which the viewer can enter and navigate the space with a contemplative spirit.

While completing this body of work, I found that my art is not simply about who I am and what I believe; it is about who I become and what is revealed to me through the process of painting. My art is not about seeing the world as it is in all its misery and turmoil; it is about calling the viewer out of that angst and revealing to him the beauty to be found in silence and hope. I believe that the best works of art are filled with an artist's honest and sincere use of materials and imagery, which brings the viewer out of his present sphere and into one that presents action through stillness, new ways of thinking, and a moment of awe.

The strength of the Catholic community is founded upon generations and generations of people who are united by a common sacrificial meal, encouraging one another to persevere, to pray, to seek peace, and to grow together in the midst of opposition and a multitude of differences; my work hopes to capture the beauty of this community.

—Mollie Baumann

VII. Listed Work:

Senior Thesis Project:

Cathedrals of the Body

1. *You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house.* Mixed Media. 36" x 48". Senior Painting Project. Spring 2012.
2. *8 o'clock Mass.* Mixed Media. 36" x 48". Senior Painting Project. Spring 2012.
3. *Jesus said, "This is my body."* Mixed Media. 48" x 72". Senior Project. Spring 2012.
4. *In Your light, I take refuge.* Mixed Media. 36" x 48". Senior Project, Spring 2012.
5. *We join the angels and saints in proclaiming Your glory.* Mixed Media. 36" x 48". Senior Project. Spring 2012.

Also shown in the gallery:

The Proper Foundation for a Home:

6. *Murphysboro, IL.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.
7. *Makando, IL.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.
8. *Chicago, IL.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.
9. *Muncie, IN.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.
10. *Plaisance, Haiti.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.
11. *The home awaiting me.* Mixed Media. 20" x 26". Liquid emulsion independent study. Spring 2012.

Senior Thesis Project:
Cathedrals of the Body



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Also shown in the gallery:
The Proper Foundation for a Home



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VIII. Bibliography

(References of inspiration used throughout the project)

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